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**Connecticut General Assembly
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
State Capitol Building, Room 508
Hartford, CT 06106**

**Senator Jorge Cabrera, Co-Chair
Representative Patrick S. Boyd, Co-Chair**

**Remarks of
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Support of: HB6483 - An act concerning the enrollment of children of members of the Armed Forces in public schools and the establishment of a Purple Star School Program.

Testimony

Honorable members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, the Department of Defense is grateful for the opportunity to support the policies reflected in HB6483, which addresses the need to alleviate the challenges military connected students face due to constant moves during their K-12 education years.

My name is Christopher Arnold. I am the northeast region liaison at the DoD-State Liaison Office, operating under the direction of Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. We represent the Department and establish relationships with state leaders across the country who are concerned for troops and their families' welfare by harmonizing state and federal law and regulation on policy problems of national significance. These are identified by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Military Departments, and the National Guard Bureau as areas where states can play a crucial role.

With each move, military service members face numerous challenges as they bring their spouses and children to resettle into new communities and attend new schools. Mobile military students face issues such as gaps and overlaps in curriculum, different graduation requirements, course placement disruption, and many other hurdles when changing schools. Besides the academic issues, these students also face social and emotional challenges of relocation, such as leaving supportive social networks and activities, to start new again.

Advance Enrollment

As with most statewide K-12 education policies that set a baseline level of support, specific guidelines not prescribed within the language of the state policy are left up to districts for local implementation. Section one of this legislation addresses this challenge by allowing military

orders to be accepted as proof of residency for the purpose of enrollment in a public school by children of members of the armed forces. This approach has been identified as a best practice for advance enrollment by the Department of Defense.¹

Approximately 185,000 U.S. military children move between schools annually. Military service members are routinely reassigned to new duty stations in the summer, due to mission and training requirements. As a result of these summer moves, they may potentially miss their child's school registration and other important application dates that occur in the spring. Long-term negative impacts include having to shift their planned courses of study, which may require them to take courses in summer school, or even force them to graduate later than their peers.

Service members typically receive official military orders detailing their upcoming assignment 90 days to 6 months prior to their move. Allowing military families to enroll their children in school, register for classes and apply for specialized programs at the same time as their peers, prior to physically arriving to their location, will help to facilitate their uninterrupted educational progress and smooth integration into their new communities, and relieve unneeded stress during their transition between locations.

In 2019, the state attempted to address this issue through HB7245, a bill which did not apply to all public schools in Connecticut and created unintended consequences for the school districts serving Naval Submarine Base New London. HB6483 of 2021 fixes these concerns, according to the school liaison office at the sub base. As of December 2020, nineteen states have adopted such policies.²

To address the issue of advance enrollment for charter schools and interdistrict magnet schools that service military families, the Connecticut Office of Military Affairs worked with LEARN Regional Education Service Center and the Military/Superintendent Liaison Committee (MSLC) of Southeastern Connecticut to obtain reasonable accommodations for military families seeking to access these schools, making them more available.³

With nearly 3200 active duty military school-age children attending school in this state, Connecticut is in a unique position to have a positive effect on the educational experiences of military children and families by enacting the policies set forth in HB6483. The intent of this

¹ Statewide policies for advance enrollment mitigate an issue that cannot be addressed by the Military Interstate Children's Compact (MIC3), while also promoting consistency for all military children transferring into and out of school systems throughout the nation.

² Sharmila Mann. Ben Erwin. "Response to Information Request." *Education Commission of the States*. December 2020. Retrieved from https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/State-Information-Request_Military-Child-Enrollment-1.pdf

³ State of Connecticut Office of Military Affairs. *Annual Report. Fiscal Year 2019-2020*. p. 19. Retrieved from <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/OMA/OMA-Annual-Reports/OMA-Annual-Report-FY-2019-20-Final.pdf>

"The DOD tends to transfer families in the summer months to avoid moves during the school year. However, the unintended consequence of this policy is that newly arriving military families often can't establish residency in time to compete in the drawing/lottery for seats in charter and magnet schools. Area superintendents implemented a program to hold back a number of seats to be made available to highly mobile families when they arrive later in the summer months. This benefits military families, giving them a level playing field to compete for seats in these unique educational programs."

policy is not to offer an advantage or priority over other students, but simply to provide military families access to educational programs and courses at the same time as their in-state peers. No new online systems are required and there is added benefit to school districts by reducing the discrepancy between projected and actual student enrollment numbers for staffing purposes.

Purple Star Schools Program

Connecticut HB6483 will help schools aggregate and centralize knowledge so that critical information is easily accessible to students, families, faculty and staff by creating a statewide Purple Star Schools program. Purple Star Schools are military-friendly schools that have demonstrated a major commitment to students and families connected to our nation's military. Designated schools have met specific state designed requirements to support the unique situations facing military students and their families.

The legislation gives Connecticut the potential to create a robust network of local, state, and national stakeholders and cultivate competency in the area of military-connected student transition, offering Connecticut's Purple Star Schools the opportunity to demonstrate their cultural fluency to parents and families. A Connecticut Purple Star School is not only a badge of honor for the school and district, it is a recognition of effort that signals to incoming families that they will be welcomed and well-supported.

The Department is hopeful Connecticut will soon join the eleven states that have established a statewide Purple Star School policy since 2017. A study of four such programs by the Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University reported that the Purple Star program is anchored by two parallel goals: (1) building and recognizing the capacity of schools and districts to serve military-connected students and families; and (2) helping families identify the schools and districts that are best prepared to meet their needs.⁴

Data from the CPRL study indicates that that state-level initiatives have made considerable progress on the first aim.⁵ The process of creating and implementing a statewide Purple Star program has naturally become easier with each new state to embark upon such an initiative. The founding program in Ohio did much of the legwork, bringing together stakeholders from different military branches and schools to formulate the basic requirements seen in most iterations of the program, including the version proposed by HB6483, which utilizes the DoD best practice for Purple Star.

The report noted that as a local opt-in, the Purple Star program already gained traction with hundreds of school districts. While the majority of these districts already had programming in

⁴ Columbia Law School Center for Public Research and Leadership. *A Study of the Purple Star School Designation Program: Summary Report*. January 4, 2021. Retrieved from <https://cpri.law.columbia.edu/content/study-purple-star-school-designation-program-summary-report>

⁵ *Id.* p. 7

"Hundreds of schools and districts have opted into the program, with those in our sample citing as incentives for participation both the relative ease of enacting program components and the value of being recognized. Better yet, schools and districts report that their efforts to refine existing programming and launch new initiatives have fostered more supportive environments for military-connected students and families. In fact, 77 percent of school staff survey respondents report that the Purple Star program has had a positive impact on their school."

place for military-connected students before seeking the formal designation, staff and faculty indicated “they have benefitted from the Purple Star application process and the encouragement to refine and expand programming related to the program designation requirements.”⁶

As our military members and their families move from state to state, providing for a smooth educational transition for their children is key to eliminating one of the largest concerns the parents face. Purple Star is of course, a bottom-up initiative that has no central governing body. Thus, DoD has identified as a best practice that states utilize their discretion to design and administer a statewide version of the program, to ensure efficaciousness through research-driven components, such as those set forth in HB6483:

- Designated Point-of-Contact: Connecticut’s Purple Star schools will appoint a staff member to act as a liaison between military families and the school, easing military-connected students’ enrollment and acclimation period;
- Professional Development: Connecticut’s Purple Star schools will train staff on the unique considerations for and needs of military-connected students;
- Dedicated Webpage: Connecticut’s Purple Star schools may develop a dedicated page on the school or district website with easily accessible information and resources for military-connected families;
- Transition Programs: Connecticut’s Purple Star schools will implement a transition program to welcome and socially acclimate incoming military-connected students; and
- Military Recognition Events: Connecticut’s Purple Star schools will host, at least once per year, programming and events to celebrate and honor service members and military-connected students, families, and community members.

Subject-matter experts from the education department and the Connecticut MIC3 retain discretion, through rulemaking, to further tailor the program to local requirements and needs to ensure equal opportunity to earn the designation for schools with varying levels of resources.

In the CPRL study, “Seventy-seven percent of schools report that the program has had a “positive” or “very positive” impact on the school overall, with no schools reporting a “negative” or “very negative” outcome. Further, 77 percent observe that the program has specifically helped improve their relationships with military-connected families, again with no schools reporting a negative impact.”⁷ “Fifty-seven percent and 53 percent of schools link an improvement in their students’ social-emotional development and academic experience to Purple Star programming, with no schools reporting a detrimental impact. Though a close to half of respondents noted no change, this is likely partially attributable to the fact that many schools had Purple Star-required programming in place before earning the designation.”⁸

In a set of parallel surveys aimed at families, “broadly speaking, a majority of families reported having better experiences at Purple Star schools than at non-designated institutions. Fifty-seven percent of parents and 50 percent of students noted that their experience at a designated school had been better than their experiences at non-designated institutions. This result is particularly

⁶ *Id.* p. 1

⁷ *Id.* p. 31

⁸ *Ibid.*

notable in light of the fact that many families were reporting on Purple Star schools that they had only attended remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions.”⁹ Parents also reported that Purple Star programming had a positive social-emotional impact on their children.”¹⁰

The clarity and precision derived from Connecticut communicating clear expectations and responsibilities at the state level ensures standardization and creates consistency as the program scales and families move more frequently between Purple Star schools, even to and from other states.

DoD recommends a state-level implementation effort to ensure that designated schools act with reasonable fidelity, provide models for core components including feedback to applicant schools that miss the mark, develop measurement systems to evaluate Purple Star impact, and leverage the program to establish formal networks.

As Connecticut is already home to 8,558 active-duty service members, 3,084 active duty spouses and 4,910 active duty children as of 2021, it has the benefit of being able to draw upon existing expertise and engagement with existing stakeholders.¹¹ Purple Star also creates an opportunity for military-impacted schools to bridge the gap between educators and evaluators of granular K-12 metrics utilized in basing decisions by the military services, such as the Department of the Air Force.¹²

In closing, let me say that we are grateful to Senator Cabrera and Representative Boyd for helping shepherd this important legislation through the Veterans’ Affairs Committee. On behalf of the Department of Defense, we thank you for considering HB6483 and respectfully pray for your favorable report of this bill.

Yours etc.,



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⁹ *Id.* p. 32

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

“Of particular interest is the notable difference between parents whose children had attended a Purple Star school and those who had not: 77 percent of parents in Purple Star schools were satisfied with their children’s social-emotional experience, compared to just 54 percent of their peers in non-designated schools. This result is echoed in the student data: 61 percent of students reported that they felt welcomed when they first started attending their Purple Star school. These results suggest that designated schools are offering strong social-emotional support.”

¹¹ DMDC, Dec. 31, 2020.

¹² Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission. 2020 Annual Business Meeting Minutes. p. 13. Thursday, October 1, 2020. Retrieved from https://mic3.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020-ABM-MINUTES_DAY1-DRAFT.pdf